



United States Senator
Richard Shelby
REPORTS TO ALABAMA



RETURNING TO THE BASICS

Recently, the United States Senate passed the A+Education Savings Account bill. This legislation contains some very important provisions which I believe will help shift the focus and concentration of power from Washington bureaucrats to local communities and parents. First, the Education Savings Account bill allows parents to contribute money to a savings account and accumulate interest tax free which can then be used to pay for any of a child's educational expenses. Secondly, the bill channels federal K-12 funds directly to the states or local communities -bypassing wasteful and unnecessary spending on bureaucrats in Washington -through block grants. Lastly, the bill contains a provision which blocks the use of federal funds for the development and implementation of any national testing program, which I feel would cost parents and communities too much in flexibility and control to be worthwhile.

I supported this bill because I believe that our education policy has been floundering. Our nation's children have been subjected to decades of ill-conceived experimentation in federal education policy. The Department of Education has followed a "theory of the month" approach, pursuing every new policy fad that comes down the pike. Year after year, our kids would find that they were learning under the new "in" theory. Inevitably, the policy fad would fall out of favor and something else would come into vogue and take its place in classrooms the next school year.

Gimmicks have also been thrown in with the fads. In most states, school children waste considerable school time each year watching educationally dubious, infomercial style programs. Rather than maintaining a strict focus on core subjects such as reading, science and mathematics, students devote time to viewing slickly produced current events shows that are designed to be more a marketing device than educational tool.

A subtle, yet equally troubling trend, has followed the introduction of the policy gimmicks and fads. Regardless of the edu-

cational theory underlying the policy fads, each has consistently overlooked a key component needed to achieve educational success -parental involvement. Numerous studies conducted across the country have clearly demonstrated a strong correlation between parental involvement and a child's educational performance. Unfortunately, our educational policies have not embraced this basic premise. A 1996 Educational Testing Service (ETS) survey of "non-urban" schools indicated that 42 percent of 8th-graders attend schools where school officials say lack of parental involvement is a moderate or serious problem. Furthermore, an ETS survey of "urban" school districts revealed that 64 percent of 8th-graders attend schools where school officials say lack of parental involvement is a moderate or serious problem.

Along with parents, local communities are also being forced out of the education equation. Since 1942, we have consolidated 109,000 local school districts into 15,000 -while the population of the United States doubled. Where a district once represented a population of 1,237, the average district today represents a population of 17,697. Local efforts to control classroom activity are all but impossible within this macro-level approach. With less ability to have input, local educators are easily overwhelmed by the federal-level bureaucracy. In his book *Bright Promises, Dismal Performance*, Nobel Laureate Economist Milton Friedman comments on the effort to achieve centralization: "Look at the Record. Spending on schooling has been rising all over the country. At the same time, the performance of students has been declining. Both are the common result of a shift of control from local communities to the states and from the states to the federal government. The farther the source of funds from the local community, the easier it is for a concentrated interest to exert political pressure, and the harder it is for the taxpayer to exercise effective control over how his money is spent."

As the country has pushed parents and local communities out

of education while welcoming federal bureaucracies, many of our European competitors have adopted the opposite approach. France, Britain, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and Spain have all been actively involved in efforts to achieve parental and community empowerment. In fact, the European Union's Maastricht Treaty directly authorizes the development of innovative ways to increase parental control of local education.

The sum total of our national educational agenda—the policy decisions we have made and the course we have taken—has not produced desirable results. The Third International Mathematics and Science Study demonstrates this clearly. Our 12th-graders' performance in math and science is amongst the worst in the developed world. In fact, out of the 20 countries that participated, our students finished last in physics and tied for last in advanced mathematics. The significance of this poor performance is compounded by the fact that many of the countries that routinely score highest in these tests, those countries that are and will continue to be our main advanced technology competitors, did not even participate in this survey. The situation is very troubling. Not only are we far behind the best of the best—we are now trailing countries who traditionally placed in the middle of the pack.

Beyond wasting time, money and producing poorly achieving students we have suffered other losses on the education front. While the trends and experiments were at the top of the bureaucratic agenda, parents and teachers, were losing the battle to maintain control of the schools. Over the last 40 years, the "problems" in our classrooms have changed from talking out of turn, chewing gum in class and running in the halls to drug abuse, pregnancy, murder, rape, robbery and assault. Our schools are no longer safe, let alone places conducive to educational achievement.

While the solution to these significant and growing problems will not be simple, we do know that merely throwing money at the problem will not correct the deficiencies. In fact, it has been shown

that there is no correlation between public spending for education and student achievement. Those with a stake in the educational bureaucracy have told us that increases in funding lead to increases in student performance, but the "spending equals learning" assertion is not supported by the facts. Some of the states and jurisdictions with the highest spending per pupil do not have students with correspondingly higher test scores. Moreover, some, like Washington, D.C., have the poorest performance scores. The bottom line—QUANTITY of funding does not automatically create educational QUALITY. Our investment in education must be geared toward producing better educated students, not better-funded bureaucrats.

It is worth pointing out some of the great achievements we had prior to the introduction of the fads, gimmicks, and creation of the Department of Education. In days past, our nation's children learned the basics in classrooms controlled by local communities where parents were actively involved in school activities. These classrooms, which by today's standards would be considered "underfunded" produced the men and women who split the atom, discovered the DNA molecule, cured polio, and landed men on the moon, among numerous other remarkable accomplishments. We should consider whether our nation's public schools could produce similarly well-educated students now.

Today, students challenge our educational system with significant and enduring problems that have little or nothing to do with their actual education. Parents must be involved in their children's lives and schools, and the schools must be given the resources and authority to provide safety and discipline to those in their care. I believe that it is time to recommit to a philosophical approach to education—one that stresses the primacy of parental control, the necessity of parental involvement, and that focuses on the fundamental importance of the educational basics. This approach demands the best quality teachers, and places the decision making power at the local level and in the hands of parents, teachers and community leaders.



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